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ABSTRACT

Two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas, and the majority of unserved and underserved handicapped students are located in rural areas. This paper describes the Rural Transition Program Specialist project, a college program to train rural professionals in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of career and educational services for handicapped students. Preservice preparation programs traditionally supply employment skills training, but this must be supplemented with daily living and survival skills. Teacher preparation for working with disabled students' transition must reflect the diverse nature of career/vocational and transitional programming, including education in special education, vocational-technical education, vocational rehabilitation, guidance, developing long range plans, implementing community-based instruction, and developing linkages when students exit school. The program trains school-based personnel as well as individuals from vocational rehabilitation and adult service agencies, thus increasing the possibility of interagency communication. Part of the training program is professional internships. Staff development programs, parent training and resource manuals, transportation access models, and self-advocacy curriculum designs are examples of internship activities. Evaluations of the program by program graduates and employers of trained students were overwhelming positive. Appendices outline the four-course sequence and competencies acquired in the program. (DHP)

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RURAL TRANSITION PROGRAM SPECIALIST:

TRAINING THE RURAL SPECIALIST

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Prepared for the 1989 ACRES-NRSSC Symposium

RURAL TRANSITION PROGRAM SPECIALIST: TRAINING THE RURAL PROFESSIONAL

INTRODUCTION

The George Washington University's Rural Transition Program Specialist training program addresses the need for qualified secondary special education personnel to prepare handicapped youth, residing in a rural area, for the transition from school to work and adult life. A program has been implemented to train rural professionals in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the full range of career and educational services for handicapped students.

Research has indicated that preservice preparation programs need to acquaint students with an understanding of the rural school environment, variables affecting service delivery in rural areas and the understanding of community service delivery. This knowledge and training is particularly essential for service providers assisting handicapped youth in the transition from school to work.

Two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas, and the majority of unserved and underserved handicapped students are located in rural areas. Variables such as scattered population, the presence of subcultures, and lack of community resources influence the ease with which services are delivered.

The transitioning of handicapped youth has become national priority. Obstacles to successful transitioning are found mainly in the areas of existing gaps in interagency cooperation, lack of in-school work-related programs, and insufficiency of follow-up services. In addition, problems unique to rural areas confront the disabled person. These problems include mismatch of curriculum content to life in rural areas, lack of transportation systems, limited employment opportunities, and higher cost of related services as compared to urban areas, due in part to travel requirements and limited personnel resources.

As a result of a grant funded by the Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, thirty-six professionals employed within a tri county area in Maryland are being trained during a three year grant period. These persons are identified as the potential team members for delivering transitional services prior to school exit to handicapped youth and may consist of the special educator, vocational educator, guidance counselor and school administrator. Representatives from vocational rehabilitation and adult service agencies have also received the training.

TRANSITION IN RURAL AREAS

According to an 1984 ACRES study, of rural disabled students who had exited high school, only 14% were on post-secondary job training programs and 23% in integrated employment settings. The largest percentage, however, 63% were placed in segregated settings such as sheltered workshops, group homes, institutions, or with parents. Unfortunately, only 58% of the rural communities surveyed had a job training program designed for disabled post-secondary students (Helge, 1984).

Rural schools and communities have unique strengths which are not found in larger populated areas, such as the "closeness" of the community, networking capabilities and the feeling that "we take care of our own". However, problems in delivering quality special education service delivery are compounded in the sparsely populated areas compared with urban areas. Rural school districts are faced with problems such as low incidence populations, necessary travel for itinerant teachers and limited budgets. In addition, dual roles often limit the time necessary for planning and programming and higher than average personnel turnover present challenges to effective programming.

In rural areas where distance from resources, subcultures present and job possibilities may vary, it is critical that each professional or team design transition services appropriate for their unique setting. Unlike urban areas where community resources are often formalized, the process of surveying the immediate community becomes necessary before services can be designed or implemented. Key community resources and individuals must be contacted for their input in structuring transitional services, as well as developing a network of communication and collaboration between possible employers, parents of handicapped students, post-secondary service providers and the school system.

Effecting change in rural school districts may be made more difficult because "innovators" are perceived as external entities imposing change on the small school. Personnel attempting to improve, or change systems may fail to take into account the unique strengths and weaknesses of the community structure and organization and the necessity to deliver strategies with respect to unique community and district characteristics.

Transition has been defined by Madeline Will (1984), Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, as the period including high school, the point of leaving school, post-secondary education or adult services and the initial years of employment when a "bridge" is formed between the security of school and the potentials of adulthood. Transition requires secure foundations both in secondary special and vocational education services and employment opportunities. Transition needs should be considered for all students with disabilities as they leave the school system.

In an attempt to explore solutions to problems in developing

rural Transition services, a more comprehensive definition of transition including the areas of leisure, housing, and personal-social skills must be employed. Emphasizing these skill areas in school-based settings will facilitate transition and help to ensure a productive adult life. Presenting skills only to success in the employment area does not ensure that daily living and survival skills will be mastered.

Much attention has been focused on appropriate content curriculum for disabled youth. The need for functional academics, career education, and vocational education has been emphasized. Many advocates of the career education approach recognize the similarities between the transition approach and sound curriculum leading to independent and satisfying lives for the disabled (Brolin, 1985).

Rural secondary programs should adopt the philosophy of career education, vocational training, and work-related experiences for young adults. Transition programs should be attuned to the specific needs of clients in their rural setting. Key components (based on Beam, 1986) should include:

* identifying competencies needed for success in the rural setting;

* matching the secondary school curriculum to available employment opportunities;

* identifying adult service providers and incorporating the "how to " of accessing services for parents and students into the school program;

* implementing a work program which uses placements within the community vs. those in simulated school experiences; and

* conducting instruction whenever possible in community-based settings.

Results from a study by Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe (1985), indicate that educational and vocational experiences do influence employment status following graduation or exit from school. The study's findings support the inclusion of these components in students IEPs, and subsequently, their individualized transition plans.

Rural and urban areas are facing the transition issue as our disabled youth exit the public school system. Productive adult life for the handicapped and the creation of positive attitudes by the community towards these adults are common goals in all geographic locations. The disabled youth or adult in a rural area faces problems which must be addressed at the local level. Specific questions need to be addressed by education, business, parent, and citizen groups, to develop a needs assessment that will aid in the transition process. Possible avenues for improved service delivery need to be explored as a collaborative

community effort.

Disabled youth and adults will face many unforseen challenges as they exit the school program. Service providers must develop transition programs with realistic goals and coordinated community services to assist them to reach their full potential. The future holds promise for the disabled if existing barriers to a fully mainstreamed adult life can be overcome.

TEACHER PREPARATION NEEDS

Teacher preparation concerns resulting from transition are closely related to the national priority of training in vocational/career special education. The U.S. Department of Education has funded both preservice and inservice projects throughout the country to prepare the range of personnel needed to fit all the service delivery pieces together. An investigation of the most effective training strategies utilized by vocational/career special education personnel preparation projects, yielded the following conclusions:

* training should focus on real problems;

* interdisciplinary groups should be involved in training;

* trainees should be assisted in developing communication networks;

* resource materials should be collected for easy access by trainees; and

* a variety of training environments can be effective.

Personnel preparation programs have the potential and responsibility to act as catalyst in a process of planned change in the career/vocational and transitional programming for handicapped individuals. This change cannot take place without the interdisciplinary communication and involvement of business and industry. Models for school based service delivery and university-based degree program are similar. Just as adequate carer/vocational programming for handicapped students cannot be accomplished in isolation, quality preservice programs cannot follow traditional disciplinary training. Training audiences as well as training environments must reflect the diverse nature of career/vocational and transitional programming. It is the responsibility of university training programs to respond to identified national, state and locate needs by developing and delivering personnel preparation programs that reflect identified quality retraining factors.

STATE & LOCAL PERSONNEL NEEDS

In the State of Maryland, the most current personnel development plan identified the need to train/retrain special education and vocational education personnel to facilitate transitional services. In order to accommodate its 93,296 handicapped students, the State Education Agency anticipates a need for 166 additional trained special education personnel and 12 additional vocational education teachers. Additional personnel training needs will result from Maryland's new special education certification requirement. In addition, the Maryland State Department of Education personnel assignments also reflect a commitment to improve secondary and transitional programming for handicapped individuals. Six interdisciplinary professionals within the state department have been projected to work with LEA's to assist in developing better coordination for transitional services. These areas of specialization include: special education, vocational-technical education, vocational rehabilitation and guidance.

In a 1988 personnel preparation survey conducted by George Washington University, special education and vocational education administrators of local school districts were asked to identify the types of training needs their education agency had in transition. Eleven of the twelve special education administrators surveyed discussed the need for practical training to meet the diverse needs of transition programming. This included training on how to develop long range plans, how to implement community-based instruction and how to develop linkages when students exit school.

In that survey, twelve vocational education administrators reported the need for training vocational education teachers on a variety of teaching methodologies appropriate for the diverse needs of students in their classes. Three administrators noted the need for training to work collaboratively with other service providers. When asked to identify the major competencies they desired in personnel they supervised, special education administrators identified collaboration skills most often, while vocational education administrators identified implementation of direct services as the competency most desired among personnel they supervised.

At the local tri county area within Maryland, the LEA's are expanding and redefining vocational/special education specialists positions to include the development of ongoing career education and transitional plans. In order to effectively follow the mandates of the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act and the 1983 Amendments to the Education for All Handicapped Act, LEA's need qualified professionals who have the knowledge and skills needed to work with a myriad of service providers, both in schools and in the community. Effective transitional services can only be provided by professionals who know how to overcome barriers in interdisciplinary/interagency collaboration. Specialized interdisciplinary training in vocational/special

education is an effective means to improved transitional services.

PROGRAM GOALS

The Rural Transition Program Specialist project is a three year project grant funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. There are two major goals for the grant: to develop and disseminate a training manual with a parent training module which will facilitate the delivery of appropriate transitional services for handicapped youth in rural environments; and to provide preservice training to a multidisciplinary group of professionals so that their expertise can be applied for the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the full range of career and educational services for handicapped youth residing in a rural area.

The training program consists of a four course sequence (12 credit hours) to be offered during the course of one funding year. Twelve professionals who are employed in rural settings within a tri county area in Maryland receive the training for each of three years. Upon completion of the course sequence, the students receive certificates indicating their proficiency as Rural Transition Program Specialists.

The purpose of the manual is to provide a practical guide for the training of Rural Transition Program Specialists who will be able to impact their local rural area. The training materials may also be used by school districts and post-secondary institutions for inservice/staff development purposes in the area of transition. In addition, the resource materials may be used by rural school systems as a guide in the individual designing of rural transition service delivery systems.

The purpose of the parent training module is to provide an example of a resource guide that rural districts could develop to assist parents in planning the secondary student's transition from school to work and adult life in that unique community.

The trainees are the potential team members for delivering transitional services to handicapped students and may consist of the special educator, guidance counselor, vocational educator and adult service provider. Upon completion of the training, participants implement their unique design within their school setting and inservice additional school staff as well. In addition, administrative personnel who receive the training have the potential for addressing transitional issues within the framework of school and district policy.

THE TRAINING PROGRAM

The training objectives of the project include three areas:

1. To facilitate the participation of handicapped secondary students in vocational programs and employment opportunities by increasing the number of professionals with knowledge of rural service delivery and competency to provide effective transitional services;

2. To develop a mutual understanding of diverse rural school and community based personnel concerning their respective roles, philosophies, policies and practices;

3. To provide individuals servicing the secondary handicapped student an opportunity to reach beyond traditional practices and approaches through identification of specific needs of handicapped youth and adults residing in rural areas, exploration of new methodologies for servicing this population, and development of new methodology and techniques which will be applicable to other rural settings implementing and providing transitional services.

During the three year period, 36 professionals who are employed in rural settings within a tri county area in Maryland will be trained. Instruction is given on-site in the tri county area. This transitional training is unique in its design and scope. The selection of highly qualified individuals affect the overall impact of the project. Whenever possible, interdisciplinary teams would be identified to be trained. Upon completion of the training, the team/individuals would implement their design within their setting and inservice additional staff as well.

Participants can directly use this coursework to meet Maryland State Certification requirements in Secondary Special Education. The training will also serve an inservice function by upgrading the skills of individuals who may already be in positions to provide transitional services to individuals who are handicapped. The certificate earned at the conclusion of the four course sequence signifies a training focus in rural transition programming and the coursework can fulfill state and professional standards by direct application to state certification and potential completion of a Masters in Transitional Special Education with Departmental approval.

While it was originally envisioned that only school based professionals would be targeted as trainees, during the course of the first two years of the project, qualified individuals from vocational rehabilitation and adult service agencies were also selected as participants. Their participation increased the possibility of interagency communication and mutual understanding

of priorities and procedures between agencies as well the expansion of a network of primary contacts within the rural community for the purpose of successfully transitioning handicapped youth from school to adult life.

INTERNSHIPS

In congruence with effective training strategies for special education and transitional personnel, the professional internship allows participants the opportunity to synthesize and implement the information acquired in the training program in practical training experiences. Projects and products generated by the practicum have the potential for making a long range impact on effective transition practices in the area. Staff development programs, parent training and resource manuals, transportation access models, self-advocacy curriculum designs, employer attitude surveys and workshops on the handicapped for the business community are examples of internship activities and products developed by first year students.

The practicum contributed to the formation of transition teams and county-wide networking systems. Each student "graduate" of the first grant year presently functions as a resource person to subsequent interns, thereby expanding the potential for trained transition teams in this geographic areas.

EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

Following the completion of the first year, evaluation instruments were analyzed in order to refine the training program to insure maximum effectiveness. Program evaluations by the twelve "graduates" indicated an overwhelming satisfaction with the program. Major strengths which were identified included: selection of instructors, networking opportunities, relevancy of assignments, targeted issues related to transition in the rural setting, and accessibility of courses to students. In addition, the opportunity to specialize within a short time frame was recognized as an substantial advantage of this program. Students were asked to rank the courses in order of their value to them. The two courses based in practical experience: accessing and designing community systems, and professional internship in transition, were most frequently selected as a first choice by students.

Employers of first year students were interviewed six months after completion of the program to determine the impact of the training program on job performance. Employers reported that graduates adjusted their curriculum to include functional academics and career education, shared information relating to transition issues with colleagues, and expanded their interactions with adult service providers.

Modifications which were made in the second grant year as a result of the evaluation process included: scheduling adjustments, substitution of an applied assignment for a research

paper in the introductory course, and an expansion of the internship experience to include an option for a specific placement in a transition related agency.

The Rural Transition program is meeting a critical need in the tri county area of southern Maryland. The courses are practical in nature and evaluations were overwhelming positive. Qualified secondary special, guidance, administrative and vocational education personnel are being trained to plan and implement programs needed to prepare rural handicapped youth to become productive and independent citizens.

Appendix 1

THE FOUR COURSE SEQUENCE

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The following course sequence describe the scope and sequence of courses to be offered during each funding year:

SPED 236 Introduction to Rural Transition Programs

An overview of rural transition programs and issues associated with service delivery. The course provides an understanding of factors involved in the career development of the handicapped individual and an awareness of options available after school exit for a variety of handicapping conditions.

SPED 233 Curriculum in Transitional Special Education

Theory and practice in planning, implementing, developing and evaluating curriculum content to lifestyles within the rural setting. Exploration of techniques and materials appropriate for handicapped adolescents and adults.

SPED 221 Assessing and Designing Community Systems for the Handicapped Youth

An overview of the health, social and educational services that exist within the rural community. The course provides an understanding of how best to integrate the handicapped youth with these services, and overview of systems theory and its application to health, educational and social services. Emphasis on consideration for rural delivery planning.

SPED 295 Professional Internship in Supportive Training, Transition and Educational Planning

Supervised field experience focusing on providing transition service delivery within the rural setting. This practicum will be individually planned to meet each student's needs and interests within the framework of transitional service delivery in rural settings. A major product will be developed as a result of this experience which will be of professional quality and practical in use.

Appendix 11

COMPETENCIES

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Upon completion of the four course sequence, participants will be able to :

Competency 1

Design and deliver competent transitional services appropriate for the rural school system and subculture in which they will be implemented.

Subcompetencies:

A. Identify and describe community issues in rural areas which impact development of transition services for handicapped youth and adults:

* community leadership;
* school financing;
* structure of school services;
* business;
* cultural diversity;
* isolation/population sparsity;
* pace of life;
* geographic barriers;
* community communication and power structures.

B. Interact with parents of handicapped adolescents to communicate vocational and transition needs and services.

C. Initiate and develop successful job placement programs through:

* a needs analysis of the community work force;
* matching curriculum content to available jobs in the community;
* identification of entry level/enabling skills, and monitoring of career choices and interests of handicapped youth.

D. Develop strategies to eliminate or lessen barriers faced by persons with handicaps residing in rural areas.

E. Identify components of successful transitional services for students of varying handicapping conditions.

F. Identify and describe procedures for accessing community transitional services.

G. Interpret research findings and relate them to the development of transition planning in the rural setting.

Competency 2

Design and effectively implement collaboration efforts with transition service providers, post-secondary programs and employers.

Subcompetencies:

A. Identify specific service delivery models that have been effective in servicing rural handicapped students.

B. Develop Individual Transitional Plans that incorporate career, vocational and transitional objectives.

C. To describe the implications of:

P.L. 98-524 The Carl Perkins Vocational Act of 1983;
P.L. 98-199 Education of the Handicapped Amendments of 1983;
P.L. 98-221 Rehabilitation Amendments of 1984;
P.L. 97-300 The Job Training Partnership Act;
P.L. 94-142 Education of the Handicapped Act; and
P.L. 93-112 The Rehabilitation Amendments of 1973.

D. Relate federal mandates to state and local education agency policies and procedures for transitional services.

E. Develop components of effective interdisciplinary and interagency cooperation including formal cooperative agreements with Rehabilitation, Vocational Education, Career Education, Guidance, Business/Industry personnel, JTPA, community colleges and multi-service community centers.

F. Attain both oral and written skills to function in effectively developing collaborative efforts.

G. Design, implement and evaluate in-service programming to effect.

H. Develop and analyze related professional presentation skills.

Competency 3

Develop a range of career and vocational competencies necessary for designing individual transition planning for rural handicapped students.

Subcompetencies:

A. Describe the secondary curricula needs of handicapped students.

B. Design, adapt and implement career/vocational and academic curricula for secondary level handicapped students.

C. Identify specific intervention strategies, techniques and resources for secondary, post-secondary, business, and community programming for individuals who are handicapped.

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